Change is happening in the Walla Walla University Mathematics Department. For one thing, Ken Wiggins is not writing this chair’s message! Ken retired in June 2014 after more than 20 years as chair. His devotion to students and fellow faculty members will be sorely missed. Luckily for me, he will still be in the area and has promised that I can call him with “newbie” chair questions at any time.

We were also saddened to say goodbye to Tom Thompson who retired in December 2013, and to Heidi Haynal who is leaving us after six years. While it is hard to part with such excellent colleagues, we are excited to welcome new faculty with their energy and fresh ideas.

What hasn’t changed is that the WWU Mathematics Department continues to promote a spirit of excellence among our students and faculty. This was seen in the excellence in thought on display at the one-day mathematics conference held last May. It is found in the generosity in service shown by mathematics faculty who take on extra projects to promote education. We see it in the beauty in expression found in students’ elegant solutions to difficult mathematics problems. And it is found in the faith in God that is the foundation of all we do at Walla Walla University.

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HAVE A QUESTION ABOUT WEBWORK?
Ask Jonathan Duncan. Visit the WeBWorK webpage at webwork.maa.org or contact Duncan at jonathan.duncan@wallawalla.edu

“WHEREVER THERE IS NUMBER, THERE IS BEAUTY.” — Proclus, 412-485 A.D.
Mark Hildebrand, mathematics and engineering major, found this quote hidden underneath the plant between the third and fourth floors of the Administration Building north stairwell, winning the 2014 Math Scavenger Hunt.

The Mathematics Department started using WeBWorK in 2007. Today, WWU hosts WeBWorK for La Sierra University and many high schools in the Western United States.

Monte Saxby, 1982 WWU graduate, uses WeBWorK in several of his classes at Skagit Adventist Academy.

“I have used WeBWorK much more consistently this year in algebra 2, precalculus, and physics,” Saxby says. “I have not done away with traditional book assignments, but I have found that there are several reasons why students benefit from WeBWorK assignments. They receive immediate feedback, and they can attempt a problem again (and again) until they get it correct. Students are more willing to do this than they would be with a traditional paper and pencil assignment. Also, because each person receives a different version of the problem, I encourage them to help each other so they learn by teaching or being taught by a peer, and everyone still has to do their own version of the problem.”

Professor contributes to homework platform

Mathematics professor Jonathan Duncan is helping make homework easier for teachers and fair for students through WeBWorK, a software platform for homework. For the past seven years, Duncan has been a part of WeBWorK’s software development and has contributed to the course work library. WeBWorK is a homework platform for creating and distributing personalized assignments on the web. In the past, students could wait weeks to receive grades; now their results are immediate. WeBWorK keeps students accountable by generating different homework problems for each student. Professors can access gradebooks and course statistics in Moodle, an open-source course management system. It also provides discussion forums where students and teachers can post properly formatted math equations. Moodle allows teachers and students to check grades and organize classes, while WeBWorK provides the link between homework and grades.

Duncan, the new chair of the Mathematics Department, has been the primary developer of the Moodle-WeBWorK bridge. Though he began contributing problems during his graduate studies at Indiana University in 2000, it wasn’t until 2007 that he began the software development. Duncan now provides ongoing service to keep up with frequent updates to the learning platforms. For more than a decade, he has contributed hundreds of free math and computer science problems to WeBWorK. These assignments are useful complements to the Mathematical Association of America’s official library of coursework.

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During department transitions the foundation remains the same
Thompson and Wiggins leave legacy of distinction

It has been a year of changes for the Department of Mathematics. We’re saying good-bye to two longtime professors who have inspired generations of math students with their wisdom and caring.

In December, Tom Thompson officially retired, teaching his last class fall quarter. You could say he left with a bang. Just before his final class, he rode an “epilon-delta” scooter down the halls of Kretschmar Hall followed by a marching band playing “When the Saints Go Marching In.” Then, he gave a short and sentimental lecture to his students taking Ordinary Differential Equations class. Afterward, he provided pies for the class and others passing through the department. Thompson has taught at WWU since 1972 and has received numerous teaching awards during that time.

Ken Wiggins will formally retire at the end of this school year. Ken began teaching at WWU in 1980 and has served as chair of the department since 1992. The department has benefited greatly from his leadership skills.

In May 2013, a math conference was organized to honor Wiggins and Thompson for their contributions to the department and for the impact they have had on the lives of so many students. Mathematics graduate Kevin R. Vixie chaired the organizing committee, which brought together an outstanding group of presenters including Andrea Hawkins-Daarud, John Foster, Shandelle Henson, Laura Foster, Ross Magi, Jon Vanderwerff, Don Schafer, Kevin R. Vixie, James Klein, Rob Frohne, Sharif Ibrahim, and Jonathan Duncan.

During the conference, Thompson and Wiggins were both recognized with plaques and the establishment of the Thomas M. Thompson and Kenneth L. Wiggins Excellence in Scholarship Fund. The fund will provide scholarships for gifted students and support their travel to mathematics conferences. If you are interested in contributing to this fund, contact Jonathan Duncan at jonathan.duncan@wallawalla.edu.

Foster, Shandelle Henson, Laura Foster, Ross Magi, Jon Vanderwerff, Don Schafer, Kevin R. Vixie, James Klein, Rob Frohne, Sharif Ibrahim, and Jonathan Duncan.

Foster joins Mathematics Department

Last fall, Walla Walla University welcomed John Foster to the Department of Mathematics as an assistant professor. A 2007 WWU graduate, Foster is a fourth generation attendee of WWU and a second generation graduate of the Department of Mathematics. Growing up with a strong background in mathematics influenced him to pursue the same course as his parents. He says, “As an adolescent, I saw that my parents bachelor’s degrees in mathematics had provided strong foundations for their future work in law, computer programming, teaching, and accounting. I thus entered college with confidence that a major in mathematics would open opportunities for me in other careers I was considering at the time.”

After interacting with the professors in his department, Foster decided that teaching appeared to be the most rewarding option out of the careers he was considering. After graduating from WWU in 2007 with a major in mathematics and a minor in computer science, Foster received both his master’s and doctoral degrees in mathematics from the University of Oregon, finishing in 2013.

Foster’s principle research interest is the representation theory of quantum groups. In May 2013, he presented his thesis defense for his dissertation, titled, “Simplicity of Certain Representation Categories.” Just before this presentation, he was a presenter at the May 2013 conference held at WWU to honor professors Tim Thompson and Ken Wiggins.